

# Coronavirus will overwhelm our civil legal-aid system

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The deeper we get into the COVID-19 pandemic, the more challenges we uncover regarding the health and economic hardships facing our communities. It is now clear that the COVID-19 outbreak in Washington leaves countless people with new and unanticipated civil legal challenges: securing unemployment benefits, staying housed, guarding against abuse and much more.

Our government needs to use every available lifeline to provide relief in this time of crisis. That's why civil legal aid, an essential part of our state's front-line response, must play an even larger role in the present emergency and during our recovery.

Gov. Jay Inslee rightly noted that civil legal aid is a crucial component of the state's comprehensive approach to the crisis. Unlike in criminal cases, people dealing with the civil justice system are not guaranteed representation from a public defense attorney.

Throughout Washington, legal aid providers and volunteer lawyers have quickly adapted to serve as many people as they can through remote client consultations, virtual clinics, and representation in telephonic emergency hearings.

But these front-line programs need much more support in the face of overwhelming new needs. And this support will become even more of a necessity as civil legal problems multiply in the fallout from this crisis.

An unprecedented number of workers need help identifying eligibility for unemployment and family-leave benefits, as well as appealing wrongfully denied claims. Most have never before had to navigate the public-benefits system; and without legal assistance, far too many will not obtain their rightful benefits to weather job losses, reduced hours and illness.

There's a front-line response that civil legal-aid advocates are in a better position to provide today, thanks to significant investments made by the state Legislature over the last three years. However, with economically vulnerable populations growing exponentially due to the COVID-19 crisis, even more investment is needed to serve these Washingtonians in the weeks and months to come.

The Seattle Times recently reported that [911 calls for domestic violence have increased](#) under stay-at-home orders and school closures. Domestic violence advocates warn that at-risk partners and children can be cut off from support networks and isolated in abusive homes. With courts operating remotely, survivors need help securing protection orders. Civil legal-aid attorneys are providing this urgent access to the justice system, helping survivors and their families get the protection they need.

We likely all know someone unable to pay their rent or mortgage, due to missed paychecks and strained household finances. Civil legal-aid programs have already been inundated with requests for help from tenants and homeowners worried about how they will avoid eviction or foreclosure when they will be months behind on their payments. Without timely access to civil legal aid, a dispute with a lender or landlord can easily lead to homelessness.

We have made great strides in closing the civil-justice gap in Washington, after key investments from the state and from private funders, such as the United Way's Home Base eviction defense partnership with the Seattle Mariners, Microsoft, the King County Bar Association's Housing Justice Project and others.

But the current crisis is generating a wave of needs that will overwhelm our legal-aid system. Even before the outbreak, just a quarter of low-income people in our state received the civil legal help they needed. And now, with so many more Washingtonians in need, we must redouble our commitment to justice for all.

Substantial and sustained support for civil legal aid must be part of our government's short- and long-term policy responses to COVID-19 at all levels. Emergency federal

stimulus funding should be directed to boosting service capacity. The state should step up its own investment, along the lines Gov. Inslee has outlined, during any special legislative session called to address the crisis. City and county leaders should make similar investments.

We can see the needs now, and we know what's coming. Washington's civil legal-aid providers are on the front lines, helping our state meet the crisis head-on. Increased support will ensure that they can effectively help guide Washingtonians through our recovery as well.

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